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SIPDIS

USNATO FOR AMB BURNS

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SUBJECT: NATO AMBASSADOR NICHOLAS BURNS' VISIT TO FINLAND,
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Classified By: PolOff David Allen Schlaefer, reasons 1.4(B) and (D)

Summary

1. (C) Of all the open questions in Finnish foreign policy, the issue of whether to join NATO is the biggest. It is debated endlessly in the editorial and op-ed pages, but that debate has yet to affect public opinion. Polls continue to show strong opposition to membership, in part because of Finland's tradition of nonalignment, in part because of Iraq, and in part because a mistrustful public still thinks of NATO in Cold War terms and does not have a clear sense of where NATO transformation is taking the Alliance. At the same time, Finland's leaders make no bones about the importance of the NATO to trans-Atlantic security. Finland retains a close relationship with the Alliance: it is an active member of PfP, and is committed to NATO interoperability. This close relationship reflects practical calculations about Finland's neighbor to the east -- the latest White Paper on national security policy, released in September, retains territorial defense as the primary mission of the Finnish Defense Forces.

The Finns also understand the importance of crisis management, however: the Finns work closely with NATO partners in Afghanistan and the Balkans, and the GoF has committed to joining two EU battle groups -- one with the Swedes and Norwegians, and one with the Germans and Dutch -- with the stipulation that this effort must be consistent with Berlin Plus. In your conversations in Helsinki, the Finns are likely to ask for your assessment of the direction in which the Alliance is moving, and the role that they can play in it, short of actual membership, and the future of NATO's relations with the EU. End Summary.

The White Paper

2. (C) Your visit to Finland takes place shortly after the GoF's much anticipated White Paper on national security policy was completed and sent to Parliament for its review in September. Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja told EUR Assistant Secretary Beth Jones on Nov. 8 (see reftel) that he expected the Parliament to approve the report's main outline with only minor revisions. The White Paper reaffirms Finland's nonalignment, although "applying for membership in the (NATO) Alliance will remain a possibility...in the future." The White Paper has since been criticized by some of the country's most committed trans-Atlanticists for being too timid in its treatment of Finland's need for allies. One commentator said that the White Paper was "born old" in failing to note the modern realities in Russia. MP Liisa Jaakonsaari, the Social Democratic Party's chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, has said that Finland's foreign policy lacks direction.

3. (C) This criticism seems to have gained some traction: at a Nov. 8 dinner in honor of A/S Jones, LGEN Ahola, second-ranking MoD official, told the Ambassador that some consideration is being given to changing "a possibility" to "a real option," more in line with the last White Paper, issued in 2001.

4. (C) Public opinion, however, remains strongly against NATO membership. By early 2003, support for joining the Alliance had struggled up to 20%, or even higher in some polls, but it plummeted to near zero after the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom. A recent poll found over 80% of respondents still opposed the idea, although most wanted the door to NATO left open. If Finland's political leadership were to recommend that Finns walk through that door, the nation probably would do so, but there is no indication this will happen in the foreseeable future. In fact, Foreign Minister Tuomioja told us last year that he did not expect the NATO question to arise during this Parliamentary term (2003-2007). Despite this, Finland clearly sees NATO as the foundation for trans-Atlantic security, and Finland has made NATO interoperability one of the guiding principles of its military. The Finns are among the most active participants in the PfP, and welcomed the Baltic States' entry into the Alliance. The White Paper states that "Finland considers a strong trans-Atlantic relationship to be important for the

security of Europe." Finland can be expected to foster that relationship on a bilateral basis with the U.S., as well as through the EU and the PfP.

Russia

15. (C) Russia obviously figures prominently in Finnish foreign policy. The stability of political and commercial relations with Russia -- and therefore the stability of Russia itself -- will always be of vital importance to the Finns. In recent conversations, they have said that while day-to-day interactions with the Russians continue on track, Finns are concerned about long-term trends. Foreign Minister Tuomioja told the Ambassador in September, in the wake of the changes made by Putin after the Beslan tragedy, that he was worried that Putin seemed to be relying more and more on people who are not by inclination natural democrats. Tuomioja also told A/S Jones on November 8 that Russia was trying to drive wedges between EU members on certain issues, and clearly did not understand how the EU worked or that Finland was now an integral EU member and not a "bridge" between Russia and the Union.

Territorial Defense

16. (C) The White Paper also reaffirmed Finland's long-standing policy that territorial defense is the primary mission of Finland's armed forces. Finnish defense strategy is based on maintaining the capability to muster a credible deterrent force of approximately 350,000 troops to counter any Russian threat. To that end, a system of universal male conscription is in place. Concerns about the compatibility of Finland's territorial defense strategy with the demands of NATO membership and/or participation in collective EU defense structures are frequently raised by detractors of both concepts. NATO and the envisaged EU force are looking more at an enhanced ability to rapidly project military force abroad, requiring members to reconfigure their armed forces accordingly. Some Finns fear that overhauling the Finnish military along these lines could jeopardize Finland's ability to credibly field a conventional territorial defense of the country vis-a-vis Russia. In addition, Poldir Lyra worries that NATO planners are pressing the three Baltic nations too hard to shift capabilities away from territorial defense, leaving the possibility of "a security vacuum in the Baltic."

Battle-Groups

17. (C) Finnish defense officials are formulating a plan for Finnish participation in EU battle-groups. The White Paper commits the nation for the first time to providing combat troops to EU rapid reaction forces. Tentative plans call for between 300-400 Finnish troops to be divided between a "Nordic" battle-group led by Sweden and including Norway, and a German-Dutch group. The Finns tell us they were able to win Greek agreement to including Norway in the battle-group only after Finnish and Swedish officials went to Athens last week to appeal directly to the Greek Government.

18. (C) The Finnish troops in the "Nordic" group would be primarily ancillary and support types, while those in the German-Dutch group would be special forces. However, Finland maintains only a small standing military of about 8,000 professionals, plus about 15,000 conscripts in training for six months. The bulk of Finland's military strength lies in reserves. Finnish politicians want to have a force of several hundred troops ready to deploy with an EU battle-group on five-days notice, without increasing the size of the "standing army." One possible solution might be to maintain a core of soldiers who would remain de facto reserves for one year after conscript service.

NATO Interoperability

19. (C) Finland is committed to being interoperable with NATO, and already is to a remarkable extent. For example, in the last 18 months, Finland has held the role, for two six-month periods, as the Framework Nation for the Multi-National Brigade Center in Kosovo. However, there are other areas where Finland has a ways to go as regards interoperability. One in particular is with its Air Force. The FiAF's 63 F-18 Hornets are superb air defense fighters; however, their datalink systems not compatible with NATO. The Finns have decided to cease further development of their unique datalink and spend scarce defense dollars on a "dumbed-down," less capable system that is NATO compatible. It is not yet clear whether this system will be operational by 2008, when the White Paper states Finland will be prepared to offer its F-18s for international crisis management/peacekeeping operations.

Landmines

10. (C) The White Paper commits Finland to signing the Ottawa Convention by 2012, and destroying its anti-personnel landmines (APLs) by 2016. This has been one of the most controversial decisions in the White Paper, and in the subsequent Parliamentary review has been criticized from the left and the right. Finland's Left Alliance (which includes the Communists, as well as a range of more moderate political figures) argued that the nation should stay with the original compromise of the 2001 White Paper, in which the government committed to joining Ottawa in 2006 -- if doing so would not harm national security -- while Conservative MPs argued that Finland should not give up APLs at all. Ministry officials tell us that the White Paper decision was a hard-fought compromise among MFA, MoD, and the Ministry of Finance (which must find the necessary millions of Euros to purchase replacement systems), and is unlikely to change.

Your Meeting at the MFA

11. (C) Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Jaakko Laajava will leave Helsinki next month to become Finland's Ambassador to the United Kingdom. The current Director General for Political Affairs, Markus Lyra, will move up to replace him at the MFA. You may wish to congratulate both on their new appointments. Laajava has been Finland's ambassador to the U.S., and is regarded as the MFA's premier Americanist. He is known to be close to former PM Paavo Lipponen, whose support for NATO membership is a poorly-kept secret in Finnish politics. Laajava himself supports NATO accession, although, given the Foreign Minister's position and prevailing public opinion, he is usually measured in his comments. He will probably provide an overview of Finland's White Paper (stressing NATO interoperability), and discuss plans for Finnish participation in the EU battle-groups. The Under Secretary may be interested in hearing about ongoing NATO operations in Afghanistan, and about the recent decision concerning NATO and troop training in Iraq. (NOTE: Finland has pledged 1 million Euros to help fund a UN Protection Force in Iraq, but bureaucratic problems in New York over the creation of a UN trust fund to manage the money has held up the project, and no funds have been disbursed.)

Your Meeting at the Ministry for Defense

12. (C) Your one hour meeting at the MoD will be split between a roundtable discussion with MoD policy makers, and a meeting with the Defense Minister, Seppo Kaariainen. The roundtable discussion will be led by MoD Policy Director Dr. Pauli Jarvenpaa. Jarvenpaa knows you from previous encounters, and he is a strong advocate of the trans-Atlantic link. Kaariainen has been Defense Minister for a little over a year, and during that time he has significantly softened the overtly isolationist agenda he brought to the office. However, he is a politician who focuses on domestic issues. Our best hope with him is for incremental gains. You might take the opportunity to thank Finland for its work in Afghanistan (18 members in a PRT; 6 military firefighters at Kabul airport; approximately 46 CIMIC specialists in Kabul); and its work in Kosovo and in helping to coordinate the EU takeover from NATO in Bosnia. He would probably also appreciate hearing about NATO cooperation with the EU, and with Russia.
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